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Newly enfranchised voters: Political attitudes of under 18-year olds in the context of the referendum on Scotland's constitutional future

Abstract:

This paper summarises results from the only representative and comprehensive survey of Scots under the age of 18 who will be enfranchised to vote in the referendum in September 2014 following the lowering of the voting age to 16. Many claims have been made about young people and their alleged disengagement from politics. This paper challenges such assertions and suggests that political interest amongst young people is similar to that of adults, however there is an observed distance to existing institutionalised actors such as political parties. In addition, the paper explores how young people form their attitudes on the issue. In doing so it criticises those who claimed that young people would be easily biased to vote in a particular way by their parents or teachers as no such negative effects can be observed.

Key words: Scottish referendum, voting age, young people, political engagement, political socialisation

The referendum on Scotland's constitutional future in September is remarkable not only in itself, but also because it will present an unprecedented extension of the voter franchise. For the first time 16 and 17 year old Scots will be allowed to cast their ballot in a Scotland-wide vote. Much has been said about these young first time voters and not all of it was very favourable. A range of critical comments has been raised suggesting that the extension of the voting franchise may be a bad idea for a range of reasons including:

- Younger people are disengaged from politics and should therefore not be involved in making such a far-reaching decision
- Young people do not form their political views themselves – they will simply vote the way their parents vote
- Young people are more prone to be swayed by grandiose, in particular nationalistic, ideas, but do not understand the complexities of politics and they will therefore be more easily swayed by nationalist ideas
- There is a danger of schools becoming politicised in a biased way with political discussions disturbing the neutral learning space schools should provide

From the onset of the debate there have also been other voices that countered the above criticisms, but crucially arguments from both sides were largely based on speculation. Nobody had conducted a comprehensive, randomised and therefore representative survey of a sample of all under-18 year olds who would be eligible in the referendum. There had been some small extensions of polling samples and some school-based cluster ones, but nothing that could give a trustworthy reflection of the attitudes of these newly enfranchised voters.

This problem has been addressed by a survey of then 14-17 year old Scots conducted in April and May 2013.¹ The age range allowed for the inclusion of young people commonly excluded from major attitudes surveys and incorporating all those who will be 16 in September 2014. This paper outlines the key lessons learnt from the survey. It details the attitudes of young people regarding the referendum, but extends the analysis to explore how they form their attitudes in more detail. In doing so the paper addresses several of the criticisms mentioned above. The engagement with these is important beyond the reach of the referendum considering discussions and movements to generally lower the voting age in Scotland and the UK.

The survey was carried out via telephone using random digit dialling to provide a probability sample as the result. While telephone surveys are not as good as face-to-face surveys in establishing representative samples they are good instruments for randomised sampling procedures in contexts where landline penetration is still relatively high, as it is in Scotland with about 80% (Ofcom, 2010). 1018 14-17 year olds were surveyed, about 125 in each of the eight Scottish Parliament electoral regions – providing a stratification framework based on equal population sizes.

After establishing that a 14-17 year olds was living in the household one of the parents living with the young person was talked to and asked for ethical consent for the interview to take place. This also enabled the interviewer to ask the parent a small number of questions about their background and voting intention. Afterwards, the young person was asked whether they were willing to take part in the survey. Considering this two-tiered consent process and experiences from telephone surveys the achieved response rate of 37% was good and adequate.

The distribution of the sample matched most relevant known population characteristics. However, there was a small bias with an overrepresentation of households in which at least one parent was the holder of a higher education degree – probably a consequence of differential landline penetration. Therefore results were weighted to account for this bias. Weights were calculated on the basis of the 2012 Scottish Social Attitudes Survey using the distribution of educational qualifications in adults aged 30 or above who had at least one child living their household with them aged 14 to 17 years as the expected values for the distribution. Using the weights made a small difference, but never more than two to three percentage points on the distributions between different values of any variables. All results reported in this paper are based on weighted results to account for such bias however.

Orientations towards the referendum

Anybody who thought that young people would be outright supporters of Scottish independence was simply wrong. Only about 23% indicated that they were in favour of Scotland becoming an independent country with 58% saying 'no' and 19% being undecided. That actually makes the 14-17 year olds the most sceptical age groups about independence compared to all others (Eichhorn, 2013). A suggestion made frequently before the survey was published claimed that young people would be more prone to nationalist ideas and

therefore would support independence. When we look at the actual distribution of national identity orientations amongst the survey respondents the voting intention figures may seem even less surprising (see figure 1).

Figure 1 about here

Compared to adults this youngest cohort is clearly less willing to favour one national identity over another. Like adults (comparing these young people to all respondents in the 2012 Scottish Social Attitudes Survey) nearly all of the 14-17 year olds identify as Scottish to some extent. However, they are much less likely to identify as solely Scottish and not British or British and not Scottish. At the same time though nearly half of the young respondents (45%) say they are equally Scottish and British – compared to only 30% amongst the adults. These newly enfranchised voters, who will probably not remember the emergence of the internet and who are used to engaging across borders virtually on a daily basis may be less receptive to drawing strict distinctions based on national borders. We can see this as well when asking respondents to choose respondents to select as many different identities as they see fit and 20% of 14-17 year olds choosing to self-identify as “European”. When Scottish adults are asked the same question a much lower proportion identifies as European (less than 7%).

Table 1 about here

However, it is worth deepening our understanding of young people’s views further to adequately understand the formation of their attitudes. The strong ‘No’ inclination recorded last year was not necessarily based on a strong belief in a version of the UK being “better together” but rather a substantial degree of uncertainty about a future independent Scotland. The relationship between the confidence in an independent Scotland and voting intention is very strong as table 1 suggests. Young people who expressed a confidence in Scotland as an independent country were very likely to vote ‘yes’ while on the other hand those indicating that they were worried were nearly all likely to vote ‘no’.

The decisive group is in the middle, showing the burden of proof rests with the ‘yes’ side. A large majority of those neither confident nor worried suggested they would vote ‘no’. A neutral position is not enough to sway young voters - they need to have a positive outlook about an independent Scotland to support it. However, while only 19% said that they were currently undecided and not able to show any leaning one way or another, the remaining

responses should not be taken as definitive. Two thirds of the 14-17 olds said that they would like more information before they finally decided compared to only 33% stating that they already had enough information to make a decision. Generally speaking the respondents showed a substantial level of engagement with the referendum. When asked about their likelihood to vote only 13% suggested that they may be very or fairly unlikely to vote (see table 2).

Table 2 about here

Looking at political interest more generally, only a small group of young people could be identified as not interested at all (see figure 2). Overall, when comparing these young people to adults, their levels of political interest were very similar indeed. A comparison to data from the 2012 Scottish Social Attitudes Survey shows that there is no reason to assume that younger people are less interested in politics than those who are 18 and older (Eichhorn, 2013).

Figure 2 about here

In summary, we are not talking about a disengaged, uninterested group of young voters at all. While there is a minority who do not care about politics or only to a limited extent, the proportions are very similar to those we find for adults. Calling young people apolitical or uninterested is simply misrepresenting them. However, we do find that there is one way in which 14-17 year olds disengage with particular political actors: Nearly 6 out of 10 respondents state they do not even feel close to any political party at all (see table 3) – far from asking whether they may support or campaign for one. It shows that while young people do not disengage from politics per se, they seem to distance themselves from the key institutions of representative politics that do not manage to reach them. The distance is larger compared to adults of whom only about 42% do not feel any party affinity.

Table 3 about here

Easily biased?

Even if young people are interested in politics though, some critics held that those newly enfranchised voters would not really contribute new perspectives but merely replicate what their parents were doing already. The survey allowed us to indicatively investigate whether

that was true. In addition to interviewing the young person we are able to also talk to one of their parents. Thus we were able to see to what extent the new voters intend to pick the same option as their parents. What we see from the results of our survey is that there is a large proportion of 14-17 year olds who intend to vote differently to their parents (44%). So only over half of all respondents (56%) held the same view as at least one parent. Similar to party dealignment we should also be careful in assuming that voting behaviour is transmitted simply from one generation to the next.

That does not mean that parents have no influence over their children at all with regards to the formation of political attitudes. Generally, when young people had talked about the referendum either with parents, friends or in class they were more likely to say they would vote in the referendum (see figure 3). The effect of talking to parents was most strongly pronounced and also the only one that was robust when controlling for other factors (sex, age, national identity, whether they have taken Modern Studies as a subject, parental education, whether they feel close to any political party and political interest). So parents do seem to influence normative aspects of political socialisation – such as inculcating voting as a norm itself.

Figure 3 about here

However, talking to parents about the referendum does not necessarily affect other political evaluations of young people (Eichhorn et al. 2014). Whether a 14-17 year old had talked to their parents about the referendum or not had no influence on their perceived knowledge about the referendum. Having discussed it in class on the other hand was related with a greater likelihood of reporting enough information to make a decision (see figure 4). Young people clearly make a distinction between their sources of information. Over half of them had talked to their parents, but it seems that they mainly viewed their parents' views as opinions rather than factual information – which school seems to be better suited to provide.

Figure 4 about here

Finally, a critic may reply, the crucial question is not which source affects which aspect of young people's political attitude formation. Instead what we need to be cautious about is the potential for political biasing. Maybe parents favouring a particular voting outcome are more persuasive or schools bias pupils in voting in a particular direction. Considering the evidence

above suggesting that young people's attitude formation is complex and multifaceted, it may be unsurprising to find that such concerns do not actually warrant more attention.

When we compare those who had talked to their parents or friends about the referendum to those who had not, we find no difference in their likelihood of voting 'yes'. Clearly, there is no biasing effect from parents or friends in the aggregate. There is a small difference with regards to classroom discussions with those who have talked about the referendum in class being slightly less likely to vote 'yes'. This difference however is not robust to controls (as outlined above) showing the relationship to be spurious and statistically insignificant (see figure 5).

Figure 5 about here

In summary, young people do not appear to be as easily biased and swayed to vote one way or another as some people have suggested. There are influences on them, but they differ depending on who young people interact with. While parental influences on voting likelihood are robust and substantial indeed, perceptions of knowledge about the referendum are only improved significantly through discussions in class. Crucially, neither talking about referendum to parents, friends or in class biases young people in a robust way to vote one way or another.

Conclusions

The newly enfranchised 16- and 17-year old voters make up just under 3% of the electorate. Suggestions that they might have been the decisive set of people to determine the outcome of the referendum were always somewhat problematic. More importantly, though, they also were often misleading because they made unfounded assumptions about young people's attitude formation and voting intention.

In fact, the youngest voters in this referendum do not seem to be particularly likely to favour particular national identities or follow others' leads without questioning. Young people neither adopt simple narratives around particular forms of identity nor do they disengage from political debate. Their levels of interest are similar to those of adults and they express a desire for more information to contribute to their own decision making process. Furthermore, they distinguish between different sources of information. Parents affect general norms, such as going to vote, but school can act as a facilitator to increase confidence in actual

knowledge about the referendum. Young people are not easily biased to vote one way or another and indeed they often hold a different view than one of their parents.

Of course these results reflect a point in the debate where awareness about the referendum amongst those surveyed stood at 94% already, however the intense phase of the campaigns had not started yet. Whether more polarisation on certain issues and alternative forms of influences have emerged while the debate has been heating up can only be answered with a repetition of the survey that will allow us to see what effect the campaigns had on young people. A second wave of the survey has been funded for 2014 and is taking place in the same time frame as 2013 (April/May) and thus will allow us to answer these questions subsequently..

However, we already learnt a lot from these observations about the formation of political attitudes in young people. Myths about their political disengagement need to be replaced with facts about their actual levels of interest but supplemented with information about their distancing from traditional political actors such as parties. There is a message that has salience much beyond the referendum which should make us think about how to better harness the interest of young people in politics to make sure they do not actually become disengaged in the future.

Tables

Table 1: Voting intention by confidence/worry regarding an independent Scotland (%)

	Very confident	Quite confident	Neither confident nor worried	Quite worried	Very worried
Yes	90	64	14	1	1
No	4	14	51	89	92
Undecided	6	22	35	10	7
	100% (67)	100% (211)	100% (239)	100% (376)	100% (99)

Question wording: "If Scotland were to become independent, would you feel confident about Scotland's future, worried, or neither confident nor worried?"

Table 2: Voting likelihood (%)

Very unlikely	7
Rather unlikely	6
Neither likely nor unlikely	17
Rather likely	25
Very likely	44
Don't know	1
	100% (1018)

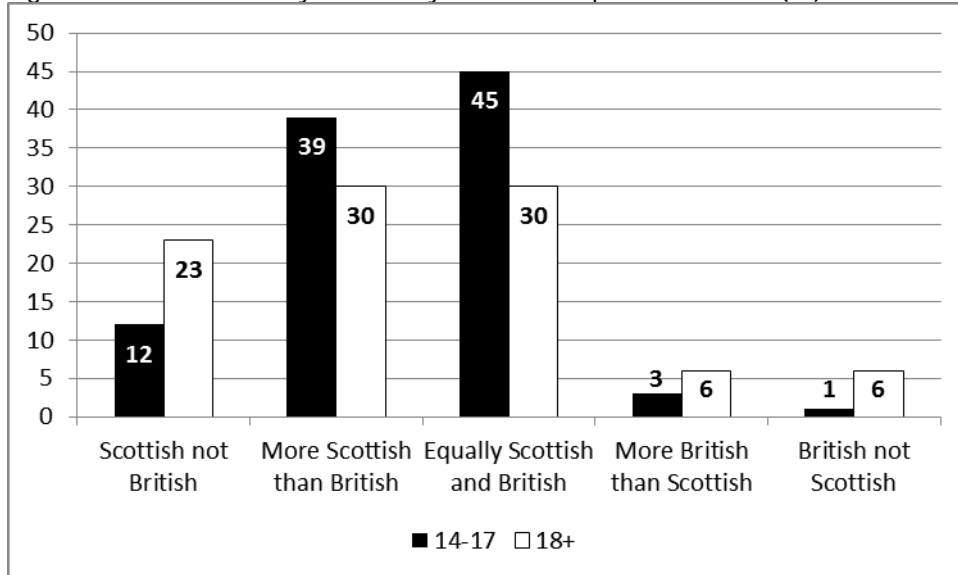
Table 3: Political party affinity (%)

Conservatives	3
Labour	24
Liberal Democrats	1
Scottish National Party	12
Green Party	2
Other	1
No party at all	57
	100% (1018)

Question wording: "Which political party, if any at all, do you feel closest to?"

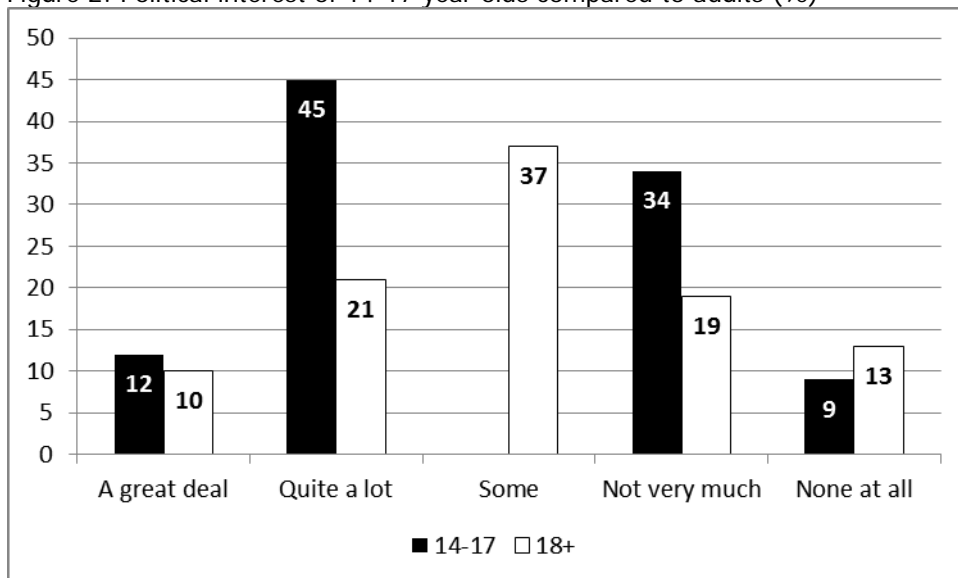
Figures

Figure 1: National identity of 14-17 year olds compared to adults (%)



Data from adults is based on the 2012 Scottish Social Attitudes Survey
(Percentages missing to 100 are "Don't know" and "Neither Scottish nor British")

Figure 2: Political interest of 14-17 year olds compared to adults (%)



Data from adults is based on the 2012 Scottish Social Attitudes Survey
(there was no "Some" category in the survey of 14-17 year olds)

Figure 3: Voting likelihood by people talked to about the referendum

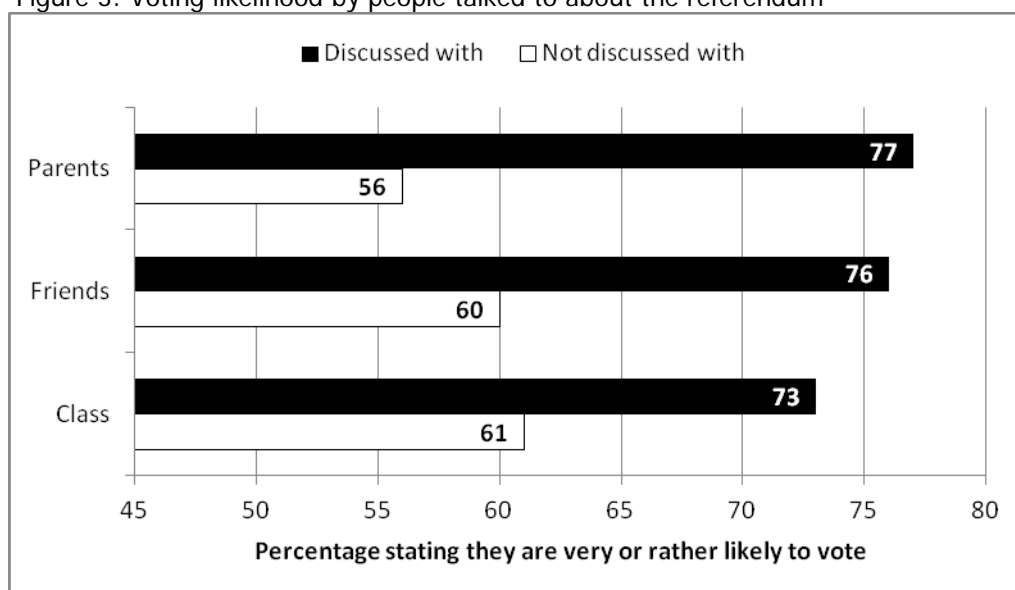


Figure 4: Perceptions of knowledge for decision by people talked to about the referendum

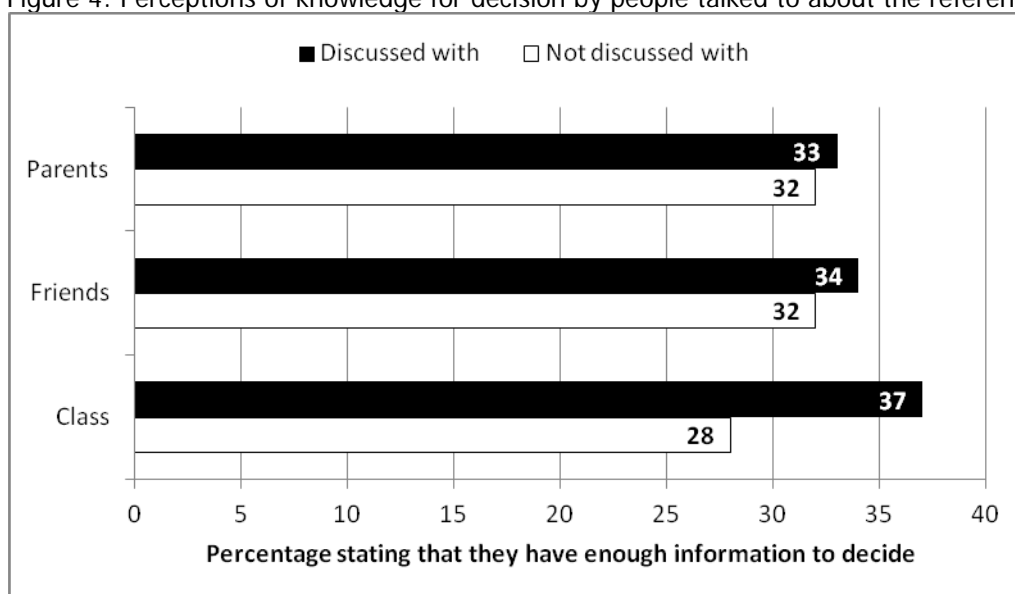
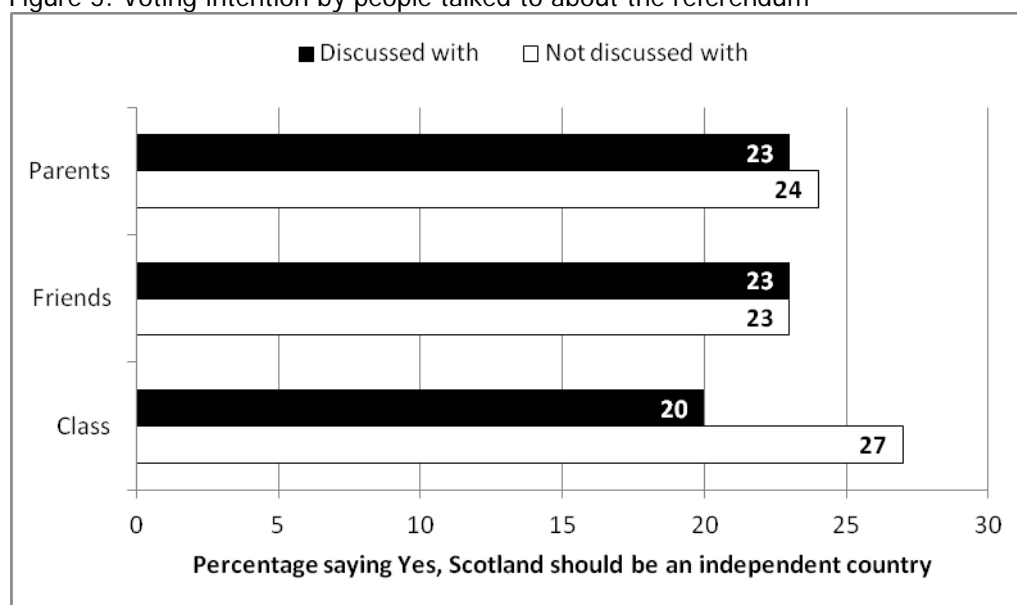


Figure 5: Voting intention by people talked to about the referendum



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